

Angel's love for her son is evident when you hear her talk about her twelve-year-old son Wyatt, "He is so funny! He loves to sing and dance. He is a loving child. He is a big teddy bear. He loves Mickey Mouse and Bugs Bunny. He loves to play tricks on you. He is a great kid." Wyatt has also been diagnosed with autism and is non-verbal. And because of this, despite the brightness and joy Wyatt offers, his parents have struggled for years securing an appropriate education for Wyatt.

Angel first contacted Disability Rights Tennessee (DRT) several years ago after facing issues with Wyatt's school. Angel worked with DRT advocates to make changes to Wyatt's Individualized Educational Plan (IEP), including changing his teacher and his case supervisor. As their case closed with DRT, both Angel and her husband Nicholas felt positive about these changes and optimistic for Wyatt's educational future.

For a long time after these changes were made to Wyatt's schooling, Angel and Nicholas believed things were going well. So, at the beginning of the last school year they were caught off guard by a call from the school. They were surprised to learn things were being pushed under the rug and the school wasn't keeping them fully informed on Wyatt's educational experience. Worst of all, they realized Wyatt's rights were being violated.

In August Nicholas received a call from Wyatt's school. They informed him that they had called the county sheriff and Wyatt was being placed in an ambulance to be transported away from the school. This transport happened without parental consent, based on a behavioral incident that was never explained to either parent. Later that night Wyatt was suspended from school.

The next day an emergency IEP meeting was called. Angel summarized the meeting saying, "During the IEP meeting they stripped him of his educational rights, demoting him to homeschooling for four hours a week." Wyatt was moved to alternative schooling which he attended in two-hour increments. There he was doing schoolwork in a room that was no more than a junk room used to store broken televisions and stacks of paper. Wyatt was not receiving the proper services he was entitled to including speech therapy, occupational therapy, or physical therapy. He wasn't learning much of anything in this environment.

Angel and Nicholas knew that the school system that was supposed to be working *for* their child was working against him. And through the whole process, the school continued to 'pull the wool over their eyes.' Knowing that Wyatt's education rights were being violated, Angel and Nicholas immediately contacted DRT.

Wyatt's parents and DRT staff worked together to request a return to Wyatt's original school. Ultimately, an administrative complaint had to be filed against the school after receiving an inappropriate response. In response to their complaint, the state's

Department of Education (DOE) ruled that the school had broken 10 state and federal laws related to Wyatt's educational and personal rights.

The school was clearly violating Wyatt's rights and further investigation revealed they were also endangering him. The investigation found that 47 different restraints had been used on Wyatt, only five of which are legal. The restraints were precipitated by actions that did *not* require restraint or isolation and Angela and Nicholas were never notified when restraints were used. And of additional concern, the report revealed that Wyatt was physically assaulted by a staff member on school grounds. While this was witnessed, it was never reported.

Wyatt's case also brought to light systemic issues in his school district and county related to education for students with disabilities. Wyatt was not alone in not having his educational needs met and his rights protected. Because of this, the county is creating district wide changes and taking steps to ensure educational rights for all students.

With DRT's help in submitting an administrative complaint, Wyatt's parents had the support they needed to advocate for their son. Wyatt will be returning to the school setting upon its reopening following the COVID-19 pandemic. He is getting speech therapy, assistive technology, and other essential services. And most importantly, Angel describes him as being happy and excited about going to school again in the same place as his older brother and with peers his age. Wyatt will be able to do things that every child should get to do, go to PE class, sit in the lunchroom to eat with his peers, and spend time with other children.

Looking back on this experience Angel says, "Wyatt is just trying to navigate this scary world, but just because he is different, does not mean that he is less. I am hoping that we are on a better path of acceptance and inclusion of these students in schools."